



NEWS RELEASE

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Board of Barbering and Cosmetology Licenses Four Female Inmates

Partnership Between Departments of Consumer Affairs, Corrections and Rehabilitation Gives Incarcerated Women Boost With Onsite Training and Testing in Beauty Industry Skills

SACRAMENTO – Adjusting from a life behind bars to a new one on the outside can be difficult, but it may just be a little bit easier for a handful of prison inmates, thanks to a partnership between the Department of Consumer Affairs' Board of Barbering and Cosmetology (BBC) and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) — and a lot of hard work by the inmates themselves.

Four inmates at the Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) in Chowchilla recently passed the state examination to become licensed California cosmetologists. Earning the right to enter a new profession is exciting under any circumstances, but for these women, it means a chance at a new life.

"Helping an inmate return to society and become a productive citizen is very satisfying for the Board," said Kristy Underwood, Executive Officer for the BBC, which awarded the licenses to the four women after testing them on-site at two Chowchilla prisons.

The onsite testing, which was held December 13 at CCWF and Chowchilla's other facility, Valley State Prison for Women (VSPW), was conducted by BBC teams of two, an experienced Subject Matter Expert in cosmetology to grade the practical portion of the exam and a BBC staffer to serve as proctor for the written, multiple-choice section. Nine women were tested.

"It was groundbreaking ... " said Stacy Meza, who coordinates the testing program for BBC and who served as a proctor at VSPW, where two of the nine candidates were tested.

— More —

Female Inmates Pass Cosmetology Licensing Exam

Page 2-2-2-2-2-2-2-2-2-2

“The women all clapped for us. It was awesome to go in there,” said Meza, adding that the BBC teams found it rewarding to be able to help the women get a leg up on life. She said it was especially moving to witness one applicant get the news she had passed the test. She was scheduled for parole just four days later.

Meza noted that the test makes no special allowance for the fact that the applicants are inmates.

“It’s exactly the same as the test we give elsewhere,” Meza said.

Previously, a criminal conviction usually prevented an applicant from earning a license. But as part of its focus on female offender reform initiatives, CDCR partnered with Assembly Member Karen Bass, who introduced AB 861, which authorized the BBC to issue a probationary license to certain applicants — such as inmates — subject to specified terms and conditions. The bill also requires the Board to study the effects of law, regulations and policy that may create unnecessary barriers to employing individuals with criminal records. Governor Schwarzenegger signed the bill into law on Sept. 22, 2006.

The licensing exam is the culmination of 1,600 hours of study. The Vocational Cosmetology programs, which are BBC-approved, offer courses of study and practical, hands-on experience at the two CDCR female institutions in Chowchilla. Plans are under way to offer the program at the California Institution for Women in Chino.

In order to be chosen for the program, an inmate has to show an interest, be able to finish the program — which can take as long as a year — before she is released, and have the appropriate educational level.

The students then spend six hours a day, five days a week in the classroom and gaining practical experience by working on prison staff and other inmates. One of the program’s side benefits is that the prison, as part of its inmate re-entry program, tries to prioritize and make the cosmetology services the students provide available to women about to go on parole.

— More —

Female Inmates Pass Cosmetology Licensing Exam

Page 3-3-3-3-3-3-3

Going to school while incarcerated has its challenges. Programs can have sporadic closures if there is a staff shortage or a lockdown, according to Wendy Still, CDCR's Associate Director of Women and Children Programs and Services at Adult Institutions. And of course the inmates cannot practice the skills of their prospective trade at will as students on the outside can.

"It takes determination and commitment on the women's part to be successful in the program," Still said.

"Rehabilitative programs such as the cosmetology program are extremely important to the reintegration of the women back into society," Still added. "These programs and the license that they can earn will help ensure that the inmate can find gainful employment, which is so critical to her success."

According to CDCR statistics, more than a third of female offenders return to prison within two years, either on a parole violation or to serve a new sentence.

Still said the other five women who failed the test the first time will get an opportunity to take it again. Meza said BBC hopes to test inmates who complete the cosmetology program approximately every six months, and is looking at scheduling the next examination sometime in July.

The mission of the Board of Barbering and Cosmetology is to ensure the health and safety of California consumers by promoting ethical standards and by enforcing the laws of the beauty industry. For more information about the Board, visit its Web site at www.barbercosmo.ca.gov.

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